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Privacy, Secrecy, Censorship

[Thoughts prior to Ron Reagan show on Journalistic Ethics: the Pentagon Papers, the Gulf War, the October Surprise, (Irangate), the William Kennedy Smith case (revelation of name of victim), Outing (Pete Williams), (Peewee Herman)...(S&Ls, BCCI)...]

Privacy is legitimate secrecy.

Privacy and secrecy rest on self-censorship.

Official censorship is obligatory secrecy: restriction on public expression and discussion.

What is not or may not be discussed or publicly expressed is not thought about, analyzed, reflected upon, challenged or criticized as much as what is expressed and a subject for discussion. Likewise, what is discussed only secretly, or in private.

Thus, restrictions on public discussion (censorship) or on even private discussion, influence and restrict conscious thought, and thus shape and restrict choice, action.

(Example: In principle, there were no restrictions on thought at Rand, or even on "private" expression and discussion, within the corporation. But the secrecy imposed on most subjects under consideration restricted the potential larger audience to the sponsors of the research. If a thought was of no interest to the sponsor, or was actually contrary to the sponsor's perceived interests, it could be expressed to the sponsor only at risk to the analyst's career (at best, the risk of a waste of time); yet it could not be expressed, outside the corporation, to anyone else at all.

Some such thoughts did get expressed, and discussed within the corporation, nevertheless. But the practical effect of this acceptance of secrecy--voluntary censorship--was that such subjects tended not to be thought about much or at all, or pursued, criticized, elaborated. What was thought about and elaborated were subjects and thoughts of interest to the sponsors and supportive of their perceptions of their interests (though occasionally contradicting those perceptions, on the grounds that their "true, long-term" interests were different, the analyst taking a risk in hopes of changing the client's perceptions. Cases of this sort, such as opposition to the B-70/B-1 or support for fixed shelters or civil defense, served to convince Rand analysts not only of their own courage and integrity but of their untrammelled freedom of thought and expression, which was, in fact, restricted in ways they were scarcely aware).]

The legitimacy of governmental secrecy is analogized--not only by government officials but in much public and journalistic discussion--to the legitimacy of private secrecy, i.e., to individual privacy. "Governmental bureaus and officials are entitled to privacy, just like private individuals: and for the same reasons, plus additional ones, 'reasons of state,' of even greater urgency."

This analogy is accepted in democratic societies like our own, just as in authoritarian or totalitarian societies. But it contradicts the theory and practice of democracy. It opposes the requirements--for public awareness, information and discussion relating to governmental matters--for the maintenance and functioning of democracy.

Democracy is compatible with--it may even require--privacy for individuals, in their non-official affairs: private secrecy, self-censorship. But it is not compatible with much secrecy, or uncontrolled secrecy, regarding the actions or even discussions of governmental officials and bureaus. Least of all can it afford legitimized secrecy, bureaucratized, sanctioned secrecy--governmental "privacy"--effectively unrestrained.

The recent functioning of the press has moved in the direction of reducing the privacy of individuals--e.g., victims of rape and homosexuals--including the privacy, in their non-official behavior, of governmental officials and candidates for office (e.g., Gary Hart, John Tower, Robert Bork), sometimes posthumously (John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson).

This has not been accompanied by challenging the "privacy"/secrecy of official behavior or discussion. Spectacular exceptions to this--the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, Irangate--raise the questions why these matters rested in secret, unexamined and unchallenged, as long as they did, and how much else of similar nature remains secret (and why). Yet these questions have not been pursued by journalists or Congress, either by initiating new probes or by examining and challenging the whole rationale for and system of governmental secrecy.

This means that the press, while posing--or being accused--as the enemy of all secrecy and privacy, the champion of total, untrammelled public information and expression--generally tolerates and supports the forms of secrecy most dangerous to democracy and human rights and survival.

The press has its priorities exactly backwards: it is scrupulous and reticent in failing to challenge governmental secrecy, but competitive and reckless in reducing individual privacy, when its practice should be the other way around.

To some extent these reversed priorities reflect another pair of inappropriate priorities (as I see it), regarding attitudes on sex and violence. In the official or social censorship of public expression, there is much greater restriction on sex than on violence. There is almost no restriction at all, in movies, TV or magazines, to children's (and adults') exposure to graphic descriptions of violence, to such an extent that action movies and even comedies have come regularly to surpass Grand Guignol. What children are forbidden to see, and what remains far less represented even for adults (outside "adult theaters")--even though freer than before--is sexual expression.

The latter is subject to enforced secrecy, obligatory privacy: like a classification system, in which violence is "unclassified," or only "confidential" (with respect to children) while sex is secret or top secret, by fiat.

The message, unmistakably, is that violence--even of the most gruesome, grotesque variety and depiction--is OK, or even good, while sex is dangerous or bad. (There is probably also a gender difference at work here: What men want to see is OK. On the other hand, what women want to see--love, tenderness--seems less depicted on screens even than sex, let alone violence. Why is this? Don't women go to movies just as much as men? The problem may be the orientation toward adolescent audiences: especially male?)

Official secrecy, of course, concerns mainly not sex but violence: the management, planning, use and execution of violence and the threat of violence. Moreover, officially-sanctioned violence is on a massive scale: it constitutes the overwhelmingly predominant incidence of violence in the world.

That is why official secrecy--precluding public control and reduction of such violence--is so dangerous. It is why democracy--which aspires to such control and must be premised on effective opposition to and reduction of such secrecy--is so important, above all in matters of foreign and "defense" policy.

Yet the journalistic and Congressional practice of according the state rights of "privacy" especially in matters of foreign and defense policy effectively foregoes the functioning of democracy in such matters, just where it is most needed.

The revelations involved in the Pentagon Papers, Irangate, and, say, the revelations by Bob Woodward after the Gulf War and after Irangate (and Bill Casey's death), are, of course, dramatic and very useful exceptions to press tolerance of governmental privacy. Yet the circumstances surrounding them raise questions that underline the basic point. Why did secrecy persist so long; why did it take so long for this information to become public?

In the first two cases, the American journalistic profession can scarcely be credited at all with investigating or bringing about the initial revelation. In the Pentagon Papers case, it took the initiative of a former government official, with no journalistic prodding, to set in motion the competitive instincts of American newspapers. In Irangate, it took the downing of an American plane by the Sandinistas, with attendant publicity, and then a revelation by a Lebanese newspaper using an Iranian source, followed by a governmental press conference (by Meese: for motives that are still unclear) to open the investigation.

In both Watergate and the Gulf War, secrecy was maintained on crucial matters until after an election, and after planned escalations in hostilities.

What the Pentagon Papers was a massive, prolonged governmental conspiracy to escalate a war--described differently, to enter a war, or most realistically, to start a war, aggressively--in secret from the American public, which was understood to oppose this, and especially to prevent any public knowledge of this planning to enter and affect a Presidential election campaign.

I first tried to expose this conspiratorial behavior five years later when it was being reproduced in 1969. I failed to get the information before the public, through Congress, in time to prevent the recurrence of secretly-planned and -executed escalation in 1969, 1970 and 1971. (Indeed, when the information finally did become public, that did not prevent still further secretly-planned escalation in the spring and winter of 1972).

Twenty years later, almost exactly the same pattern was played out in the fall of 1990, with most newspaper readers remaining ignorant in the months before an election (Congressional, this time) of secret planning and Presidential intentions leading toward a massive escalation--again, better described as the starting of a war (this time, in response to an earlier clearcut aggression)--which most of the public would have opposed, at least at this time.

One difference from the earlier situation was that this time some newspapers did report the evidence of this planning and preparation enough for their readers to be adequately informed, in time. Yet this information in, for example, the Los Angeles Times or Newsday--and most British and Continental papers--did not "leak" in the slightest degree to the New York Times or Washington Post, which did not acknowledge the prospect of such planned escalation even as a hypothesis or rumor. This despite the fact that Bob Woodward of the Post clearly had such information, prior to the election, from his conversations with Colin Powell and others.

Which was more important: to know whether Gary Hart was sleeping with someone not his wife (and that Peewee Herman had masturbated in an adult theater) or to know, before an election and before the

war, whether George Bush was secretly planning and preparing to "liberate" Kuwait not by economic sanctions--as the public was told by Bush and the press in the months before the fall elections--but by killing 200,000 Iraqis?

Which of these elicited greater press effort to reveal? Which got greater attention, once revealed? (Hint: to this day, the latter point remains "secret"--or at most, a charge, a suspicion--to most newspaper readers, including those who rely on the New York Times. Even Bob Woodward pays no retrospective attention at all in his book to Bush's planning for air and ground invasion of Iraq--revealed clearly at the time by the LA Times and the London Sunday Times, among others--prior to a few weeks before the election).